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INSIDE THE BELTWAY

Grilling Mrs. Graham

J Katharine Graham had a little trouble getting her stories straight the other day at the meeting of the shareholders of The Washington Post. The chairman became a little flustered when faced with double-team questioning from media critic Reed Irvine and provocative talk-show host Les Kinsolving.

J Mr. Irvine asked about the handling of a report that CIA Director William Casey had threatened to seek prosecution of The Post and other newspapers (including this one) for publishing classified information. Mr. Irvine thought the story poorly handled. Mrs. Graham said the story was handled just fine.

"Does your ombudsman think so?"

"Well, we'll ask him."

Joseph Laitin, the ombudsman, wasn't there. It soon became clear that Mr. Laitin didn't know there was a shareholders' meeting going on.

Mrs. Graham said, "Well, then, he's pretty stupid."

Mr. Irvine and Mr. Kinsolving both asked if she really thought The Post's ombudsman was stupid. "No. If he doesn't know this meeting is being held, he's stupid," the chairman said.

The dynamic duo pushed on. Had Mr. Laitin been invited or not? Mrs. Graham waffled a bit, but then recovered her decisiveness. "I wouldn't think of having the ombudsman here," she said, because it's a business meeting.

Mrs. Graham defended her board of directors. "We answer questions openly and thoroughly." She tried once more to dismiss the problem of the ombudsman: "He shouldn't be here." The back-and-forth continued, and Mrs. Graham stuck to her position that there was "no compelling reason" for Mr. Laitin to be present.

Mr. Irvine said that among other topics of discussion was whether directors should tell stockholders to "shut up."